

Dionysus Lives

Carola Scupham

The Greek gods were never static. They continually transformed themselves through the ages, and revealed new possibilities, though never giving up all their mystery. Dionysus – or Bacchus, as the Roman called him – is the god who perhaps came to mean more to different ages than any other. The youngest god, and the only one with a human mother, his early years were fraught with danger. He was saved from being burnt alive like his mother Semele, only by Zeus' quick thinking and a sort of reverse Caesarian (he was cut into Zeus' thigh); then, after a rather Frankensteinish episode, being torn to shreds by the Titans, boiled, and reconstituted by his grandmother Rhea – thus earning the name 'twice-born'), he was protected until he grew up by the nymphs of Nysa, in Asia. Some say he even reached India. So it was from the East that he eventually journeyed back to Greece, drawn by a tiger chariot, with a band of unruly satyrs and wild dancing women, the maenads, and bringing with him the great liberating, but dangerous, mystery of wine.

As he travelled from Asia (via Naxos, his favourite island – but that's another story!) to Thebes, he encountered the pirates, as the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* describes. The pirates meant to kidnap him for a hefty ransom, but ended up as dolphins plunging into the sea, while the ship turned into a combined vineyard and zoo, Dionysus himself becoming a lion and eating the captain: only the helmsman, who had stood up for him, was saved. The god's arrival in Greece was even more catastrophic for those who opposed him. One of these, Lycurgus king of Thrace, was sent mad by the god, killed his son, and pruned him, thinking he was a vine. But at Thebes, the city of his birth, worse was to come. King Pentheus (son of 'Dragon's Tooth' Echion) rejected him. We see Pentheus, in Euripides' most horrific play, *Bacchae*, first raging uncontrollably against this effeminate Oriental guru, then transformed – metamorphosed into a 'woman'; finally, after hearing how the women of Thebes have torn him apart limb from limb, we see his head carried in by his triumphant mother, in the belief that he was a young lion, and then her agonising realisation of the truth. In this play we see both sides of the god: he brings joy, ecstasy, freedom (especially to women, who in Greek society were rather restricted) and divine communion through the savage ritual of tearing and eating a living creature; but when denied, he destroys without mercy.

Roman and Byzantine variations

Ovid, in *Metamorphoses* Book 3, which centres on Thebes, makes use of three of these episodes: Bacchus' birth and narrow escape from Juno's jealousy, his return to the city (now as Liber, the Free) and punishment of Pentheus, and, as part of this story, the pirate adventure, told by the surviving helmsman, here named Acoetes. Acoetes sets out from Lydia, via Chios; Bacchus asks to be taken to Naxos, but the pirates plan to sail East – they are probably aiming for Cilicia, where all the best pirates live. But, of course, they never got there. For Ovid, apart from its dramatic transformations, the myth is exotic and passionate, uncovering the violence at the heart of both man and nature which so fascinates him.

A different side of the story attracted the twelfth-century Byzantine author of *Christus Patiens*, The Suffering Christ. For him, Dionysus 'came unto his own, and his own received him not'; he was imprisoned and tortured; he wrought miracles; and

was finally owned as God. What could be more powerful, then, than to use Euripides' *Bacchae* as the basis for the story of Christ? When you remember the god's human mother and his gift of wine, together with the ecstatic communion ritual of shared body and blood, the links are strong.

Dionysus in modern Greece

A much-loved modern Greek poet, Sikelianos, who died in 1951, brought Dionysus to life again in a new and dazzling combination of ideas. The poem is called 'The Dodekanese Set Free'. The Dodekanese – the Twelve Islands – extend from Patmos in the north to Karpathos and Rhodes in the south. They were in the hands of one occupying power after another – Franks, Turks, and Italians – until 1947, when at last they were restored to Greece. Sikelianos retells the *Homeric Hymn* in a new light. For him, the pirates of these isles are infidel Turks and eastern barbarians, while Dionysus himself, together with his reincarnation as St. John the Divine of Patmos, with their life-giving wine of freedom, are God and the Orthodox Church. He sees an endlessly recurring struggle between these forces of evil and good – but good, like the god, will surely prevail:

*East and West, hearken, the hour is signalled...
Put on your crimson robes
and let the Alleluia echo from one end of the earth to the other;
let the answering chorus cry 'Evoe, evan' to the ends of the world!
See the ancient ship set forth again
with the god Dionysus, arms akimbo, at the helm,
its great centre sail swelling with the wind of Freedom.*

Yet another metamorphosis – here Dionysus has become the champion of Greece and of her Church, and joins in the world's celebration at the end of war and the start of a new era.

All this makes Dionysus terribly serious, even rather grim. But Dionysus can also be one of the jolliest of gods – the god of the spring festivals at Athens, the Dionysia when, as shape-changer, he gave the actors their power of transformation, and the Anthesteria when, as god of freedom, he let everyone run riot for a few days, trying the new wine and partying in the streets. It is but a short step from these festivals to the Carnival of both Orthodox and Catholic church calendars, celebrated on the last few days before Lent, from Venice to New Orleans, with processions, street parties, and exotic costumes and masks. In Athens you can still see splendid costumes, parades and mock-battles with clubs (plastic ones!) and confetti. Nearly every Greek village and island has its own special carnival festivity; sometimes the parade will include a float in the form of a ship – just like the one on which Dionysus was brought into Athens for the original festival, reminding us of his voyage over the Aegean – and on Kos I spotted Dionysus himself!

So – a god of enormous power, of the forces of new life; a god who suffered and took terrible revenge; and a god who can still set us free from conventional restraints and transform us with joy. Long live Dionysus!

Carola Scupham teaches at Letchworth in Hertfordshire.